

Poetry---A Necessary Evil?

GEORGE W. COFFIN

After struggling with and against Chaucer the other night I'm inclined to raise my voice in loud and lusty agreement, that the study of poetry is difficult. Confound it, at times it seems nearly impossible! There have been nights when I have battled so with evasive symbolism or grasped vainly at some flowery, ethereal imagery, that I have been tempted to rationalize my way out of the whole situation. "Hell, Doc, you can't let this crazy thing drive you nuts. Besides, it's just not worth it. Poetry isn't of any use to you anyway!" Brother, I know just how you feel! But the University requires a certain amount of English Literature before you can scamper cheerfully from the University College into the college of your choice. English Literature includes poetry and there must be some reason behind it. Now I don't pretend to know all the answers on this academic system, but here are a few of my own ideas. I'm going to try to show you how you can practically get an "A. B." background by poetry alone.

In the first place, if any one guy has to be able to express himself, do it quickly, in the fewest, well chosen words, and do it under pressure of difficult literary situations, the fall guy is always the poet. Some of the best concise literary expression has been recorded in verse. The meaning is there if you will just struggle a little to find it. And it stands to reason that you'll absorb a certain amount of this ability for self-expression by reading it or being exposed to it in class. No one could read Wordsworth's *Michael* without agreeing that the picture he created is one of the most vivid ever put into writing. These poets have terrific vocabularies, too. They

must get just the right meaning along with meter, rhyme, and rhythm and they can't do it with a four-letter word vocabulary. You're going to pick up quite a few new words as you read this stuff. Sure, you'll have to crack Webster once in a while, but you didn't really expect to breeze through college without books and study, did you?

A big vocabulary and self-expression aren't all you'll get. Some of the best philosophical thought in the world has been recorded as poetry. Plato, Socrates, Kant, and Schopenhauer aren't the only men in the field of philosophical thought. Try reading *Rabbi Ben Ezra* by Browning for inspirations of hope and action; if you're the confirmed cynic, then you'll want to read Swinburne's *Garden of Proserpine*. There is probably one of these poets that agrees completely with your own thoughts on life and living; the only way to find out is to read some of it and see. Poets use really good character studies and through them you get a nice background of psychology too. Of course no one can top the "Old Bard," Shakespeare, when it comes to psychological character studies, but there are others to consider too. Oscar Wilde, in his *Ballad of Reading Goal*, gives a wonderful insight into the mind of a man condemned to die on the gallows; you can't very well call yourself broadminded until you have read it. It's amazing what an insight you'll be able to develop for yourself just by reading another guy's opinion; you're going to become something of a philosopher and psychologist yourself. These poets must have known what they were talking about or someone would have thrown the books away years ago. But whether you agree

with them or not, you will begin to think and that's important!

You're a literary genius, a philosopher, and a psychologist now and that still isn't all. Tell you what I'm gonna' do; I'll give you a painless course in history. You know there's a lot that happens in this old world that is really important but just doesn't find its way into history books. Some of it wouldn't look quite right in text books and it certainly wouldn't look the same all draped in the robes of academic language anyway. Now these poets didn't have such qualms of conscience when they wrote. They put down what they saw and put it down just as it appeared to them. You can get a lot of extra pointers on how people lived years and years ago by seeing it through the eyes of a poet. If it weren't for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, we would have lost almost the entire picture of that particular period in English history. Some poetic history is just like a novel.

In a lot of this historical writing you'll get adventure and romance. Now that's a touchy spot, isn't it? About all anyone has to do is give a jab at romance and, bub, you're off like a respectable bat-out-of-hell. None of that stuff for you! That's my reaction too when it comes my way in class, but there is an angle to consider here. Romance isn't all mush or bedroom situations either for that matter. A story of adventure is a romance; if you like adventure, Jack, you're stuck, because you like romance whether you know it or not. All right, you can read a book about it. You can if you can find the time and if

the story has been conveniently written in prose. But to save time and latch onto some stories you've probably never heard, try some of the romantic poets. The Arthurian Legends have all been treated in poetry and make really good reading. If this period appeals to you, you might try Spenser's *Faerie Queene* for the background of King Arthur himself. Of course there is a lot of symbolism to understand, but you won't struggle without some profit. And don't laugh at the guy who just writes about beauty either. If you look into it closely he may be talking about something that you enjoy to. Of course his words may be a little different, but none of us talk exactly alike anyway. Maybe you think you could say it better yourself. Son, if you can then you're a poet yourself and I've just been wasting my time. But if you aren't a poet, and most of us admittedly aren't, try reading poetry. Learn to read it correctly. Read through it for the feeling first and then go back over it slowly for the exact meaning. If you do it this way you'll be surprised just how much you can get out of it and how much easier it will be. You're required to have poetry and you might just as well get all the benefits out of it. You wouldn't buy a white shirt these days and then go out leaving it on the counter, would you? Well, don't buy a course in English Literature and go out leaving expression, philosophy, psychology, history and romance lying undigested in that text book. Dig in and get it even if it does mean a little work.